PETER ZUMTHOR ATMOSPHERES

Architectural Environments · Surrounding Objects

Birkhäuser
Basel · Boston · Berlin

‹Atmosphere is my style›

J M W Turner to John Ruskin in 1844

The Island of the Dead (first version), Arnold Böcklin 1880, Kunstmuseum Basel

Conversing with Beauty

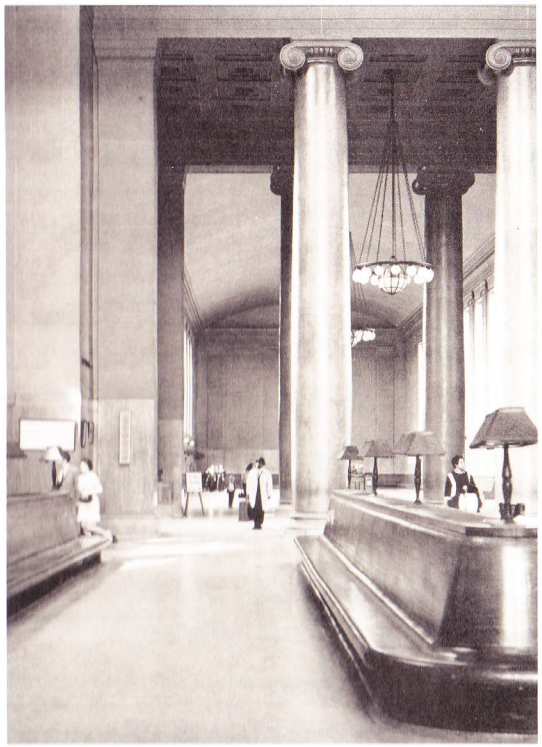
There is an exchange, a give-and-take, between Peter Zumthor's buildings and their surroundings. An attentiveness. An enrichment. Words like atmosphere and mood inevitably come to mind when faced with Zumthor's architecture; the perfectly tempered feel of his built spaces is immediately communicated to viewers, residents, visitors and the immediate neighbourhood. Peter Zumthor appreciates places and buildings that offer people a haven, a good place to live and unobtrusive support. Reading a place, becoming involved with it, working out the purpose, meaning and goal of a brief, drafting, planning and designing a piece of architecture is therefore a convoluted process that does not follow a straightforward, linear path.

For Peter Zumthor, atmosphere is an aesthetic category. This publication gives readers insight into the role it plays in his work and what it means to him. Reprinted here is the lecture the Swiss architect delivered on 1 June 2003 on the occasion of ‹Wege durch das Land›, a Festival of Literature and Music in Germany. Titled ‹Atmospheres. Architectural Environments. Surrounding Objects›, the lec-

ture fittingly took place in the castle of Wendlinghausen and explored affinities between locations and the arts as part of the project ‹Poetic Landscapes›. The latter are philosophical ventures that always begin with a location, linking it to a person, a literary event or a motif. This then is varied through the ages or links one place with another in readings and concerts performed by actors, writers and ensembles of both local and international origin, accompanied by dance theater, exhibitions and discussions. Within the framework of this project, Peter Zumthor and I joined forces, walking through fields and meadows, through towns and bleak, dispersed building developments, talking, asking questions, conjuring images …
The lecture itself was embedded in a program extending over several days, which took inspiration from the architecture of the Weser-Renaissance style of the castle in Wendlinghausen to inquire into the measure of beauty. Wendlinghausen is a prime example of the architectural premises of its age: use and convenience, permanence and beauty – revered by Italy's great Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio in the spirit of Vitruvius. The outcome is unadorned architecture that is deeply rooted in the landscape and constructed out of local materials. The literary and musical program was devoted to 16th and early 17th-century Italy. Danish writer Inger Christensen's reading from her novel ‹The Painted Room› – about the famous nuptial suite of the Duke of Mantua, painted by Andrea Mantegna – as well as Goethe's Italian Journey to Palladio's buildings highlighted the motif of beauty and analysed whether beauty can be translated: outer beauty, the measure of things, their proportions, their materials as well as their inner beauty, the core of things. It is perhaps apt to speak of the poetic quality of things.

To preserve the spontaneity and immediacy of Peter Zumthor's words, editing of the lecture, delivered to more than 400 listeners, was kept to a minimum.

Brigitte Labs-Ehlert Detmold, October 2005



Broad Street Station, Richmond, VA,
John Russell Pope, 1919

The title **‹Atmospheres›** is generated by a question that has interested me for quite some time. And you are unlikely to be surprised when I tell you what it is: what do we mean when we speak of architectural quality? It is a question I have little difficulty in answering. Quality in architecture does not – not to me anyway – mean inclusion in architectural guides or histories of architecture or getting my work into this or that publication. Quality architecture to me is when a building manages to move me. What on earth is it that moves me? How can I get it into my own work? How could I design something like the room in that photograph – one of my favourite icons, a building I have never seen, in fact I think it no longer exists – a building I just love looking at. How do people design things with such a beautiful, natural presence, things that move me every single time.

One word for it is atmosphere. This is something we all know about. Our first impression of a person. What I learned was: don't trust it – give the guy a chance. Years passed. I got a bit older. And I have to admit that I'm back to believing in first impressions. It's a bit like that with architecture, too.

I enter a building, see a room, and – in the fraction of a second – have this feeling about it.

We perceive atmosphere through our emotional sensibility – a form of perception that works incredibly quickly, and which we humans evidently need to help us survive. Not every situation grants us time to make up our minds on whether or not we like something or whether indeed we might be better heading off in the opposite direction. Something inside us tells us an enormous amount straight away. We are capable of immediate appreciation, of a spontaneous emotional response, of rejecting things in a flash. That is very different from linear thought, which we are equally capable of, and which I love, too: thinking our way through things from A to B in a mentally organised fashion. We know all about emotional response from music. The first movement of Brahms's viola sonata, when the viola comes in – just two seconds and we're there! (Sonata No. 2 in E Flat Major for Viola and Piano) I have no idea why that is so, but it's like that with architecture, too. Not so power-fully as with that greatest of arts, music – but it is there nonetheless.

Baking Day in Vrin, Carrying Bread, Ernst Brunner, 1942, Ernst Brunner Collection, Basel

I am going to read you something I wrote about this in my notebook. Just to give you an idea of what I mean. It is Maundy Thursday 2003. Here I am. Sitting in the sun. A grand arcade – long, tall, beautiful in the sunlight. The square offers me a panorama – the facades of houses, the church, the monuments. Behind me is the wall of the café. Just the right number of people. A flower market. Sunlight. Eleven o'clock. The opposite side of the square in the shade, pleasantly blue. Wonderful range of noises: conversations nearby, footsteps on the square, on stone, birds, a gentle murmuring from the crowd, no cars, no engine sounds, occasional noises from a building site. I imagine the start of the holidays making everybody walk more slowly. Two nuns – we're back to reality now, not just me imagining – two nuns waving their hands in the air, trip lightly across the square, their bonnets gently swaying, each with a plastic carrier bag. Temperature: pleasantly fresh, and warm. I am sitting in the arcade on a pale-green upholstered sofa, while the bronze figure on its tall pedestal in the square before me has its back turned, looking across, as I am, at the twin-towered church. The helmshaped spires of the two church towers are unequal.

Bruder Klaus Chapel, under construction, Mechernich, building in the landscape, model

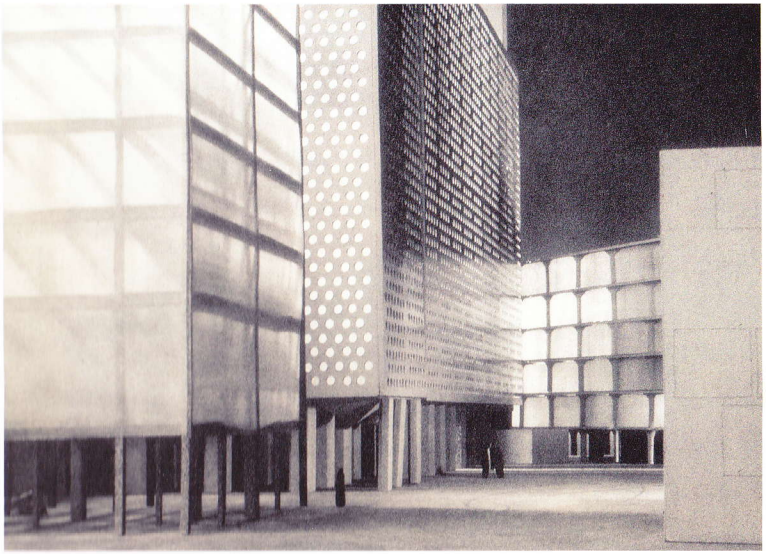
identical at the bottom, they gradually rise into individual shapes. One is taller, with a golden crown surrounding the peak of its spire. In a minute or two B. will walk diagonally from the right across the square towards me. So what moved me? Everything. The things themselves, the people, the air, noises, sound, colours, material presences, textures, forms too – forms I can appreciate. Forms I can try to decipher. Forms I find beautiful. What else moved me? My mood, my feelings, the sense of expectation that filled me while I was sitting there. Which brings that famous Platonic sentence to mind: ‹Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.› Meaning: it is all in me. But then I perform an experiment: I take away the square – and my feelings are not the same. An elementary experiment, certainly – please excuse the simplicity of my thinking: I remove the square and my feelings disappear. I could never have had those feelings without the atmosphere of the square. It's quite logical really. People interact with objects. As an architect that is what I deal with all the time. Actually, it's what I'd call my passion. The real has its own magic. Of course, I know the magic that lies in thought. The passion of a beautiful thought. But what I'm talking about here is

Palazzo Trissino Baston, Vincenzo Scamozzi, 1592, Vicenza, inner courtyard

Student Housing, Clausiusstrasse, Hans Baumgartner, 1936, Zürich

something I often find even more incredible: the magic of things, the magic of the real world.

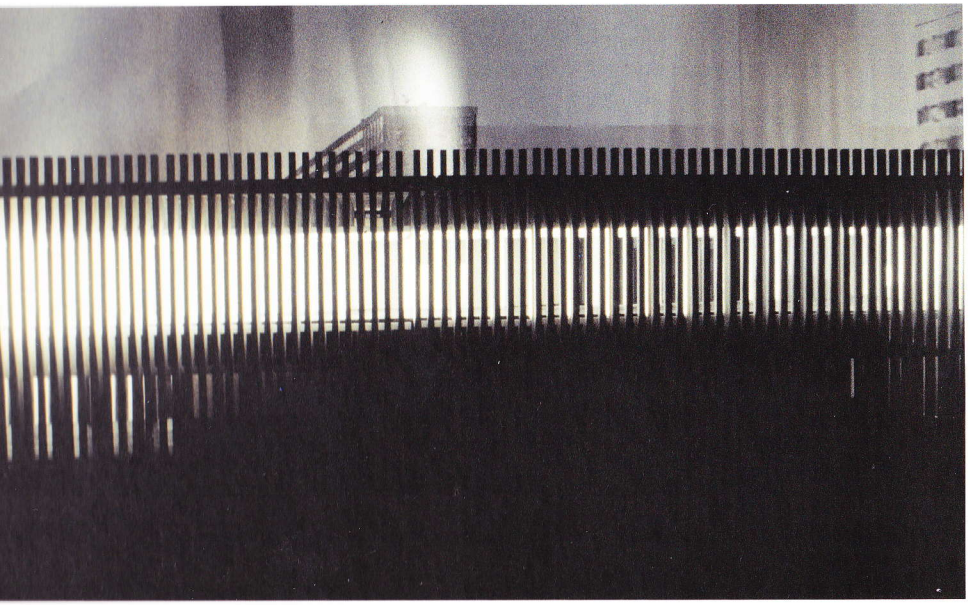
A question. A question I put to myself as an architect. I wonder: what is this **‹Magic of the Real›** – Café at a students' hostel, a thirties picture by Baumgartner. Men, just sitting around – and they're enjoying themselves too. And I ask myself: can I achieve that as an architect – an atmosphere like that, its intensity, its mood. And if so, how do I go about it? And then I think: yes, you can. And I think: no you can't. And the reason I can is because there are good things and things that are not so good in the world. Here's another quotation. A sentence by a musicologist in an encyclopaedia of music. I've had it enlarged and put up on the wall in our office. I said: that's how we've got to work! The musicologist was writing about a composer, one whose name you're bound to guess, and he put it like this: ‹Radical diatonism, forceful and distinctive rhythmical pronunciation, melodic clarity, harmonies plain and severe, a piercing radiance of tone colour, and finally, the simplicity and transparency of his musical fabric, the stability of his formal structures› (André Boucourechliev on



De Meellabrik, project, Leiden, Netherlands, conversion and expansion project, model

‹the truly Russian Spirit of Igor Strawinsky's musical grammar›). That's now up on the wall in our office for everyone to read. What it tells me is something about atmosphere: the composer's music has that quality too, the ability to touch us – to touch me – within seconds of listening. But what it also tells me is that a great deal of work has gone into it, and I find that consoling: the idea that the task of creating architectural atmosphere also comes down to craft and graft. Processes and interests, instruments and tools are all part and parcel of my work. I've been keeping an eye on myself, and I'm going to give you an account now, divided into nine very short chapters, of what I've found out about the way I go about things and what concerns me most when I try to generate a certain atmosphere in one of my buildings. Of course, these answers to the question are highly personal. I have nothing else. They are also highly sensitive and individual. In fact, they are probably the products of sensitivities themselves, personal sensibilities, making me do things in a particular way.

First answer. Its title: **‹The Body of Architecture›**. The material presence of things in a piece of architecture, its



frame. Here we are sitting in this barn, there are these rows of beams and they in turn, are covered etc etc. That kind of thing has a sensual effect on me. And that is what I would call the first and the greatest secret of architecture, that it collects different things in the world, different materials, and combines them to create a space like this. To me it's a kind of anatomy we are talking about. Really, I mean the word ‹body› quite literally. It's like our own bodies with their anatomy and things we can't see and skin covering us – that's what architecture means to me and that's how I try to think about it. As a bodily mass, a membrane, a fabric, a kind of covering, cloth, velvet, silk, all around me. The body! Not the idea of the body – the body itself! A body that can touch me.

Documentation Centre, Topography of Terror, Berlin, view of the bar frame exterior, model

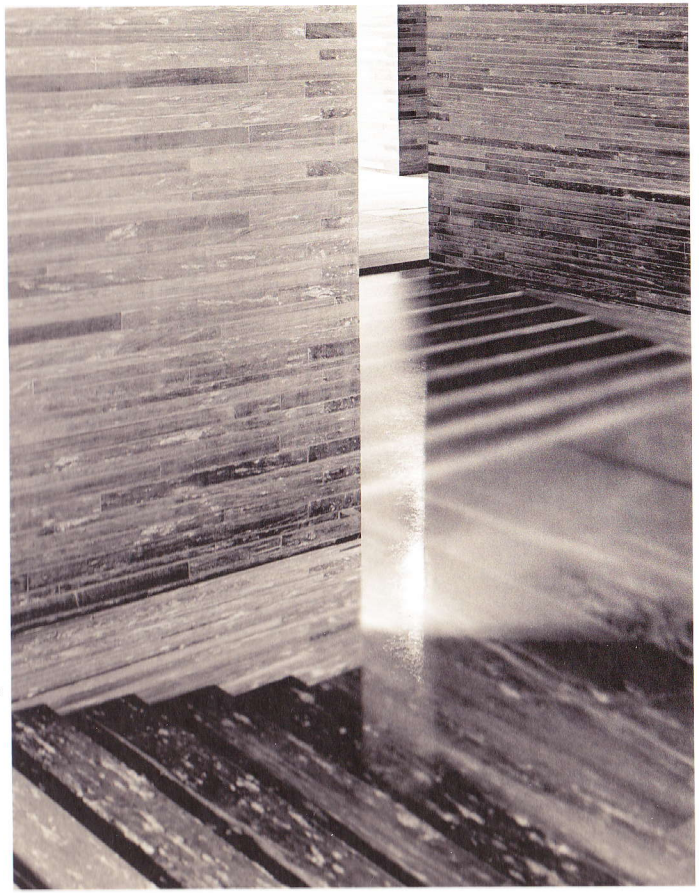
Second answer – a grand secret, a great passion, a joy for ever. **‹Material Compatibility›**. I take a certain amount of oak and a different amount of tufa, and then add something else: three grams of silver, a key – anything else you'd like? To do it I would need someone to be the owner, so we could get together and arrange things – first in our heads, and then in the real world. And we would look and

see how these things reacted together. And we all know there would be a reaction. Materials react with one another and have their radiance, so that the material composition gives rise to something unique. Material is endless. Take a stone: you can saw it, grind it, drill into it, split it, or polish it – it will become a different thing each time. Then take tiny amounts of the same stone, or huge amounts, and it will turn into something else again. Then hold it up to the light – different again. There are a thousand different possibilities in one material alone. This is the kind of work I love, and the longer I do it the more mysterious it seems to become. One is always having ideas – imagining how things will turn out. And when one actually puts the stuff up – in fact, this happened to me just last week: I was quite sure I wouldn't be able to use some soft cedar for surfaces in a huge living-room in this exposed concrete building. It was too soft. I was going to need something harder, something more like ebony – with enough density and mass to counteract the weight of the exposed concrete – which also has this unbelievable lustre. Then we took that to the real building site. O shit! The cedar was better after all. I suddenly saw it – the cedar was so soft

Bruder Klaus Chapel, under construction, Mechernich, model of lead floor and water

and had no trouble at all asserting itself in this milieu. So I went and took all the palisander stuff out again, the mahogany we'd used. One year later: dark, hard, richly grained precious woods were reintroduced, along with softer, paler ones. In the end the cedar with its stark, linear structure was seen to be too brittle. It was never used. That is just one example of why things often seem so mysterious to me. And there's something else too. There's a critical proximity between materials, depending on the type of material and its weight. You can combine different materials in a building, and there's a certain point where you'll find they're too far away from each other to react, and there's a point too where they're too close together, and that kills them. Which means that putting things together in a building has a lot to do with … – okay, you know what I mean! No – otherwise I'd be talking about this for another half an hour. Yes, because I have examples. I've written down ‹Palladio›, which is where I find this kind of thing, where I've seen it again and again: that atmospheric energy you find in Palladio especially. And I'll just mention that all the same, because I've always had the feeling that as an architect, as a master builder, he must

Bruder Klaus Chapel, under construction, Mechernich, sample cast of lead floor



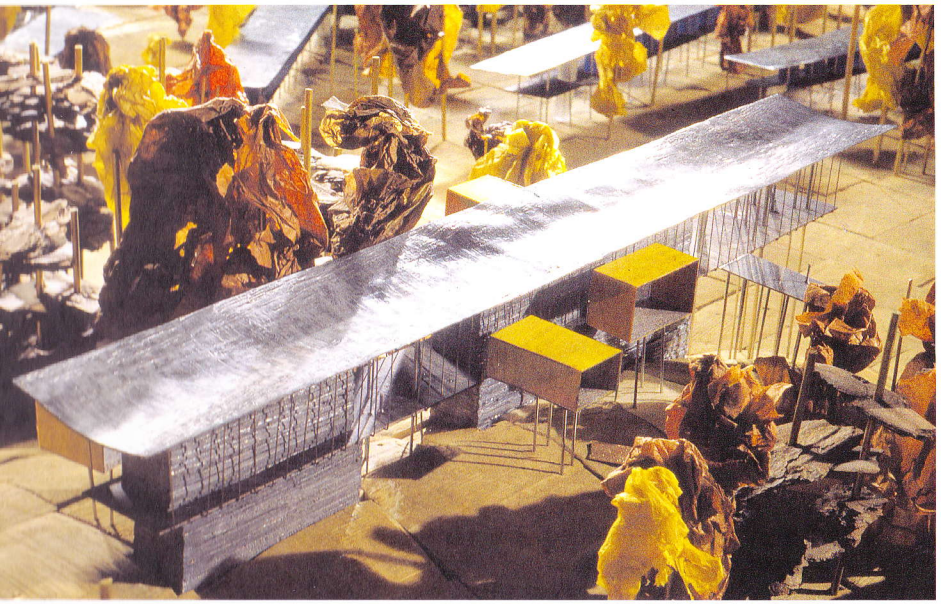
Thermal Baths Vals, Peter Zumthor, 1996, Vals, Graubünden

have had an extraordinary sense of the presence and weight of materials, indeed of the very things I'm trying to talk about.

Thirdly: **‹The Sound of a Space›**. Listen! Interiors are like large instruments, collecting sound, amplifying it, transmitting it elsewhere. That has to do with the shape peculiar to each room and with the surfaces of the materials they contain, and the way those materials have been applied. Take a wonderful spruce floor like the top of a violin and lay it across wood. Or again: stick it to a concrete slab. Do you notice the difference in sound? Of course. But unfortunately many people are not aware of the sound a room makes. The sounds we associate with certain rooms: speaking personally, what always comes first to my mind are the sounds when I was a boy, the noises my mother made in the kitchen. They made me feel happy. If I was in the front room I always knew my mother was at home because I could hear her banging about with pots and pans and what have you. But there are sounds, too, in a great hall: the noises in the grand interior of a railway terminal, or you hear sounds in a town and so on. But if

we take it a step further – even if it gets a bit mystical now – and imagine extracting all foreign sound from a building, and if we try to imagine what that would be like: with nothing left, nothing there to touch anything else. The question arises: does the building still have a sound? Try it out yourselves. I think each one emits a kind of tone. They have sounds that aren't caused by friction. I've no idea what they are. Maybe it's the wind or something. But you only really feel there's something else there when you enter a space that's soundproofed. It's lovely. I find it's a beautiful thing when you're making a building and you imagine the building in that stillness. I mean trying to make the building a quiet place. That's pretty difficult these days, because our world has become so noisy. Well, not so much here, perhaps. But I know other places that are much noisier and you have to go to some lengths to make quiet rooms and imagine the sound they make with all their proportions and materials in a stillness of their own. I realise the sound I am making must remind you of a sermon – but isn't it more simple than that, and more pragmatic? How does it really sound, when we walk through it. When we speak, when we talk to each other – what will

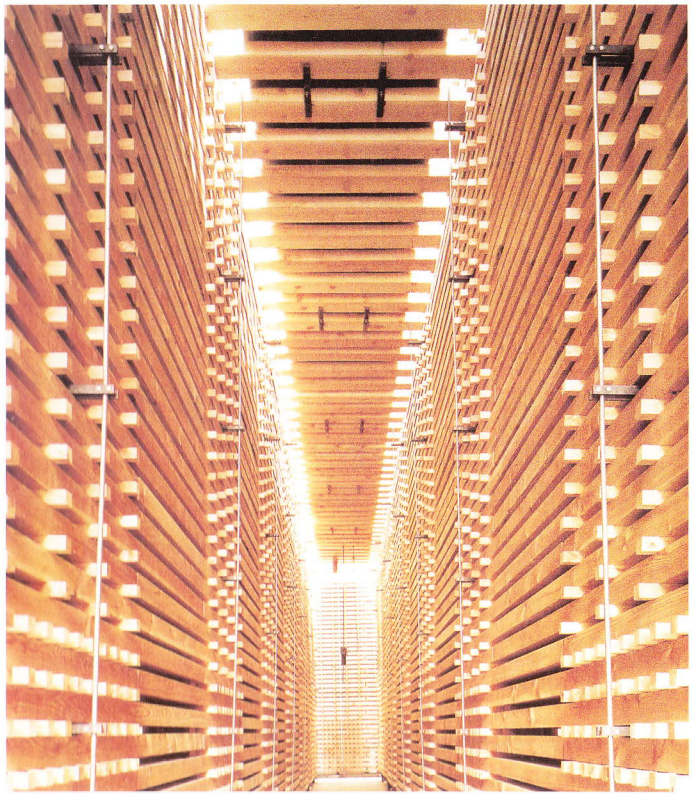
Swiss Sound Box,
Expo 2000, Hannover



Project for a training centre and a park at Lake Zug, Switzerland, detail of study model

the sound be? And what if I want to sit in a living-room and talk to three good friends on a Sunday afternoon and read at the same time? I've got something written down here: the closing of a door. There are buildings that have wonderful sounds, telling me I can feel at home, I'm not alone. I suppose I just can't get rid of that image of my mother, and actually I don't want to.

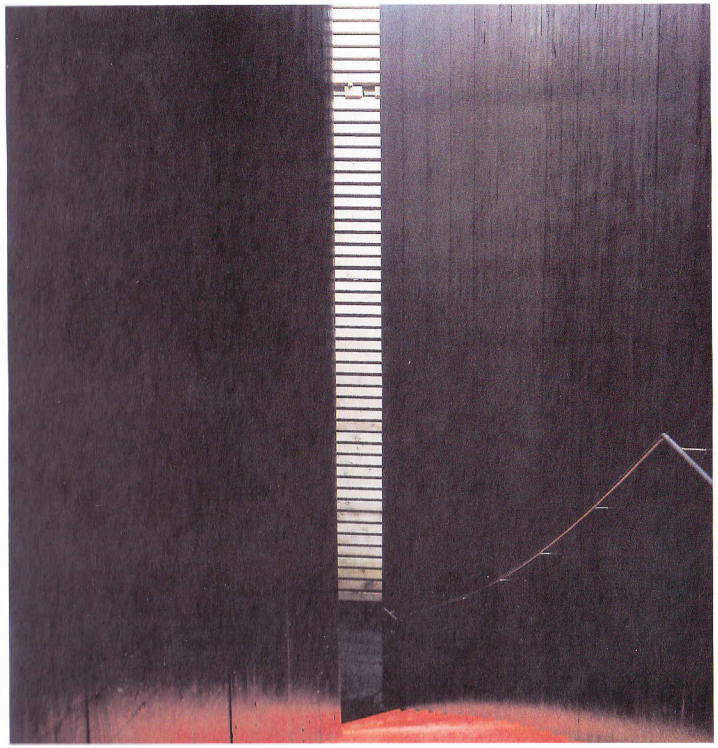
Fourth. **‹The Temperature of a Space›**. I am still trying to name the things that are important to me in the creation of atmospheres. Temperature, for instance. I believe every building has a certain temperature. I'll explain what I mean. Although I'm not very good at doing so even when the subject interests me so much. The most beautiful things generally come as a surprise. We used a great deal of wood, lots of wooden beams, when we built the Swiss Pavilion for the Hanover World Fair. And when it was hot outside the pavilion was as cool as a forest, and when it was cool the pavilion was warmer than it was outside, although it was open to the air. It is well-known that materials more or less extract the warmth from our bodies. Steel, for instance, is cold and drags the temperature down



Swiss Sound Box,
Expo 2000, Hannover

– that kind of thing. But what also comes to mind when I think of my own work is the verb ‹to temper› – a bit like the tempering of pianos perhaps, the search for the right mood, in the sense of instrumental tuning and atmosphere as well. So temperature in this sense is physical, but presumably psychological too. It's in what I see, what I feel, what I touch, even with my feet.

Fifth. There are nine items, and we've reached the fifth. I hope this isn't boring you. Fifth: **‹Surrounding Objects›**. It happens again and again when I enter a building and the rooms where people live – friends, acquaintances, people I don't know at all: I'm impressed by the things that people keep around them, in their flats or where they work. And sometimes, I don't know if you've noticed that too, you find things come together in a very caring, loving way, and that there's this deep relationship. I was in Cologne a couple of months ago, for example, and young Peter Böhm was showing me around, and he took me to the Bienefeld houses. And for the first time I managed to get a glimpse of the interior of two of the Bienefeld houses in Cologne. It was a Saturday, at nine o'clock in the morning. It made a



great impression on me. These houses are incredibly full of beautiful details – one might even say excessively so! And you feel the presence of Heinz Bienefeld, and all these things he's made all over the place. And there are the people too. One of them was a teacher, the other a judge, and they were all dressed as German burghers are supposed to be on a Saturday morning. And you saw all these things. Beautiful objects, beautiful books, all displayed, and instruments too – a harpsichord, violins etc. But those books! Anyway, it all made a great impression on me; it was very expressive. And I got to wondering whether the job the architecture had set itself here was to create these receptacles to house objects. Allow me a short anecdote. I was talking about this sort of thing to my students a few months ago, and there was a Cypriot assistant in the audience – and what a hard time one can have growing up in Cyprus! – who was a marvellous architect. She designed a little coffee-table for me, and badly wanted to keep it for her own use. And later, after the lecture, in which I spoke in rather more detail than I just have about the objects in our surroundings, she said: «I disagree entirely. These things are nothing but a burden. I carry my world in a

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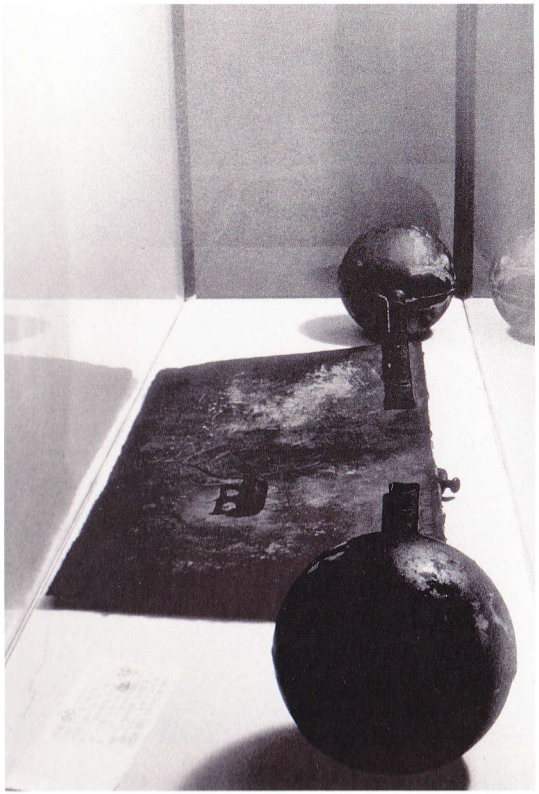


rucksack. I want to stay on the road. All that stuff – the sheer burden of it … not everyone wants to carry such a bourgeois weight of objects around with them, you know.› I looked at her and said: ‹And that coffee-table you wanted?› She didn't say a thing. That seems to confirm something we all know about ourselves anyway. My examples are maybe a bit nostalgic. But I think it's probably the same when I'm building a bar – something that's meant to be really cool, or creating a disco, and of course it's true too for a House of Literature – what's needed is a design that prevents things becoming too leisurely and nice. The idea of things that have nothing to do with me as an architect taking their place in a building, their rightful place – it's a thought that gives me an insight into the future of my buildings: a future that happens without me. That does me a lot of good. It's a great help to me to imagine the future of rooms in a house I'm building, to imagine them actually in use. In English you could probably describe it as ‹a sense of home›. I've got no idea what one might call it in German – we can't really use the word ‹Heimat› any more, can we? My notebook tells me I should find something about this in Nietzsche: In ‹The Wanderer

In Zumthor's studio

Bridge in Italy

and His Shadows›, aphorism 280 – appearance and being in the world of commodities, also in his ‹Posthumous Fragment› (1880/81): ‹...especially its (the object's) bodily existence, its existence qua substance ...›. I'd also like to read Baudrillard's ‹System of Objects› (1968) on this.

There is something else that keeps me on my toes, part of my work I find really exciting, and to which – point six – I shall give the heading **‹Between Composure and Seduction›**. It has to do with the way architecture involves movement. Architecture is a spatial art, as people always say. But architecture is also a temporal art. My experience of it is not limited to a single second. Wolfgang Rihm and I are in full agreement about this: architecture, like music, is a temporal art. That means thinking about the way people move in a building, and there are poles between which I like to place my work. Let me give you an example, in connection with some thermal baths we built. It was incredibly important for us to induce a sense of freedom of movement, a milieu for strolling, a mood that had less to do with directing people than seducing them. Hospital corridors are all about directing people, for example, but

there is also the gentler art of seduction, of getting people to let go, to saunter, and that lies within the powers of an architect. The ability I am speaking of is rather akin to designing a stage setting, directing a play. In these baths we tried to find a way of bringing separate parts of the building together so that they formed their own attachments, as it were. That is what we were trying to do, anyway; I don't know if we succeeded – I don't think we did badly. These were spaces you would enter and begin to feel you could stay there – that you were not just passing through. I'd be standing there, and might just stay a while, but then something would be drawing me round the corner – it was the way the light falls, over here, over there: and so I saunter on – and I must say I find that a great source of pleasure. The feeling that I am not being directed but can stroll at will – just drifting along, you know? And it's a kind of voyage of discovery. As an architect I have to make sure it isn't like being in a labyrinth, however, if that's not what I want. So I'll reintroduce the odd bit of orientation, exceptions that prove the rule – you know the sort of thing. Direction, seduction, letting go, granting freedom. There are practical situations where it is more

Swiss Sound Box,
Expo 2000, Hannover

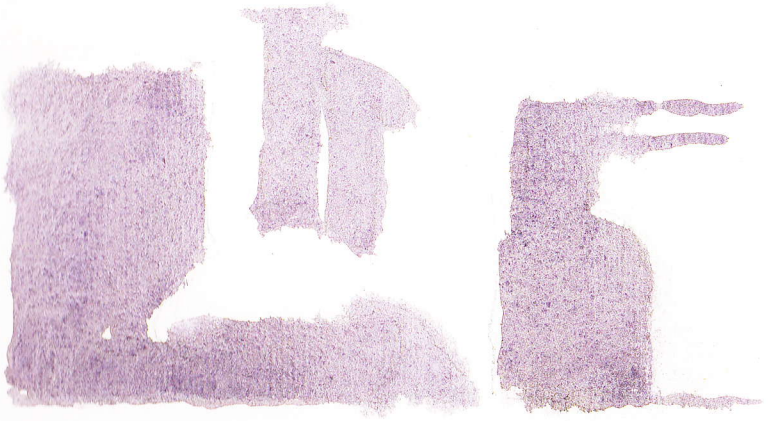
I Ching Gallery, Pavilion for *I Ching*, a sculpture by Walter De Maria, project, Dia Centre for the Arts, Beacon, NY, USA

sensible and far cleverer to induce a calming effect, to introduce a certain composure rather than having people running around and looking for the right door. Where nothing is trying to coax you away, where you can simply be. Lecture halls have to be like that, for instance. Or living-rooms. Or cinemas. A place of great learning for me in this respect is the cinema, of course. The camera team and directors assemble sequences in the same way. I try that out in my buildings. So that appeals to me. So that it appeals to you, too, and more especially, so that it supports the uses of the building. Guidance, preparation, stimulation, the pleasant surprise, relaxation – all this, I must add, without the slightest whiff of the lecture theatre. It should all seem very natural.

Seventh. Something else, something very special that fascinates me about architecture. **‹Tension between Interior and Exterior›.** A fantastic business, this. The way architecture takes a bit of the globe and constructs a tiny box of it. And suddenly there's an interior and an exterior. One can be inside or outside. Brilliant! And that means – equally brilliant! – this: thresholds, crossings, the tiny

loop-hole door, the almost imperceptible transition between the inside and the outside, an incredible sense of place, an unbelievable feeling of concentration when we suddenly become aware of being enclosed, of something enveloping us, keeping us together, holding us – whether we be many or single. An arena for individuals and the public, for the private and public spheres. Architecture knows this and uses it. I own a castle. That's where I live and that is the facade I present to the outside world. The facade says: I am, I can, I want – in other words, whatever the owner and his architect wanted when they built it. The facade also says: but I am not going to show you everything. Sure, there are things inside – but you go and mind your own business. That's what castles are like – that's what town flats are like. We use signals. We observe. I don't know if this passion of mine affects you in the same way. This isn't voyeurism. On the contrary, it has a great deal to do with atmospheres. Think of ‹Rear Window› – Alfred Hitchcock. Life in a window observed from without. A classic. You see this woman in a lit window wearing a red dress, and you've got no idea what she's up to. But then – yes, you do see something! Or the reverse:

Domino de Pingus Winery, project 2003, Penafiel, Spain



Natura morta, Giorgio Morandi 1963, Museo Morandi, Bologna

Edward Hopper's ‹Early Sunday Morning›, with the woman sitting in a room, looking out of a window at the town. I'm proud of the way we can do that as architects with every building we make. And whenever I'm doing a building I always imagine it in those terms: what do I want to see – me or someone else using the building later – when I am inside? And what do I want other people to see of me? And what sort of statement do I want to make publicly? Buildings always say something to a street or the square. They can say to the square: I am really glad to be situated on this square. Or they could say: I am the most beautiful building here – you lot all look ugly. I am a diva. Buildings can say that sort of thing.

Now, the next thing is something which I had always been interested in but never knew I was until I recently discovered it for the first time. I don't really know much about it – you will notice that as we go along – but it's there all the same. It's something I'm going to keep on thinking about. I'm giving it the heading: **‹Levels of Intimacy›**. It all has to do with proximity and distance. The classical architect would call it scale. But that sounds too academic – I mean

Kunsthaus Bregenz, Peter Zumthor, 1997, bar

something more bodily than scales and dimensions. It refers to the various aspects – size, dimension, scale, the building's mass by contrast with my own. The fact that it is bigger than me, far bigger than me. Or that things in the building are smaller than me. Latches, hinges, all the connecting bits, doors. Maybe you know a tall slim door that makes everyone who comes through it look great? Or do you know that rather boring one, wider – somehow shapeless? And the enormous, intimidating portal where the person who comes to the door looks good, or proud. What I'm talking about is the size and mass and gravity of things. The thick door and the thin one. The thin wall and the thick. You know the kind of buildings I mean? I'm fascinated by that sort of thing. And I always try to create buildings where interior form, or the empty interior, is not the same as outdoor form. In other words, where you don't just take a ground plan and draw lines and say: these are the walls, twelve centimetres thick, and that division means inside and outside, but where you have this feeling of the interior as a hidden mass you don't recognize. It's like the hollow tower of a church, and the feeling of climbing up inside the walls. That's just one

Villa Rocca,
Vincenzo Scamozzi,
1575, Pisana

example among thousands I could give that have to do with weight and size. With things being the same size as me, or smaller. And it's interesting that there are things bigger than me that can intimidate me – the representative state edifice, the nineteenth-century bank, columns, that kind of thing. Or, as I was reminded yesterday, Palladio's Villa Rotonda: it's huge, monumental, but when I get inside it I don't feel intimidated at all – feel quite sublime, in fact, if I may be allowed such an old-fashioned term. Instead of intimidating me, these are surroundings that somehow make me feel larger, allow me to breathe more freely – I don't know how to describe it actually, but I'm sure you know what I mean. You find both extremes. So you can't say: big is bad; it lacks a human scale. You hear that when greenhorns get onto this subject – in fact, you hear it from architects, too. The view is that a human scale has to be more or less the same size as us. But this is not so easy. And then, another thing to do with distance and proximity, with distance from me, distance between me and a building – I like the idea of doing something for myself, just for me, for one person. There's me on my own, of course, and me as part of a group – completely different

stories. Did you see that students' café earlier on? And now let's look at this marvellous building by Le Corbusier. I'd be proud to have done that. So on the one hand, there's me, on my own, or me and other people in a group, and then there's me in a crowd. There's the football stadium. Or if you want, the palace. These things need thinking about, in my opinion. I think I'm good at thinking about them, I think I'm good at thinking about all of them. The only area I do have big problems with though – I'd like to be able to do this, too, I really would, but I just can't get it right – is with skyscrapers. I just can't seem to get my head round the idea of me and that of many people – 5000 or whatever – in a single skyscraper: how I'd have to go about the design in order to feel happy with so many people in one of these high-rise buildings. What generally comes across when I see a high-rise is its external form and the language it talks to the town, which can be good or bad or whatever. One thing I do have a grasp of imaginatively, however, is the football stadium with its 50 000 people – doing a bowl like that can be a wonderful experience. Yesterday Vicenza: the Olympics Theatre. We heard all about our friend Goethe, and how he saw all

Villa Sarabhai, Le Corbusier, 1955, Ahmedabad

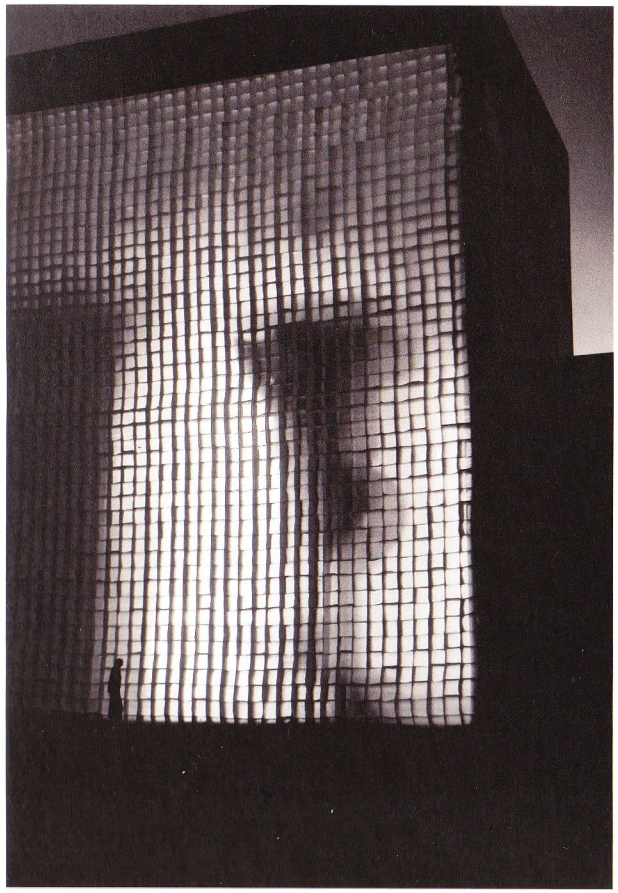
these things so much earlier. And he really does notice things – that's the wonderful thing about him: he really does look. Okay, that's what I mean by these levels of intimacy that are still so important to me.

Toni Molkerei, Zurich

The final chapter. When I was writing all these things down a few months ago, sitting in my front room, my living-room, I asked myself: what's missing? Have you got everything down? Is that all you do? And then it occurred to me. All very simple. **‹The Light on Things›.** I spent five minutes or so looking at the actual appearance of things in my living-room. What the light was like. And it was great! I'm sure you've had the same experience. Where and how the light fell. Where the shadows were. And the way the surfaces were dull or sparkled or had their own depth. Then I noticed it again, later: Walter De Maria, an artist in America, showed me a new work he'd done for Japan. It was to be a huge hall – two or three times the size of this barn. And it was to be open at the front and completely dark at the back. And he had put two or three gigantic stone balls in it: solid stone, quite enormous. Right at the back there were wooden bars, coated with

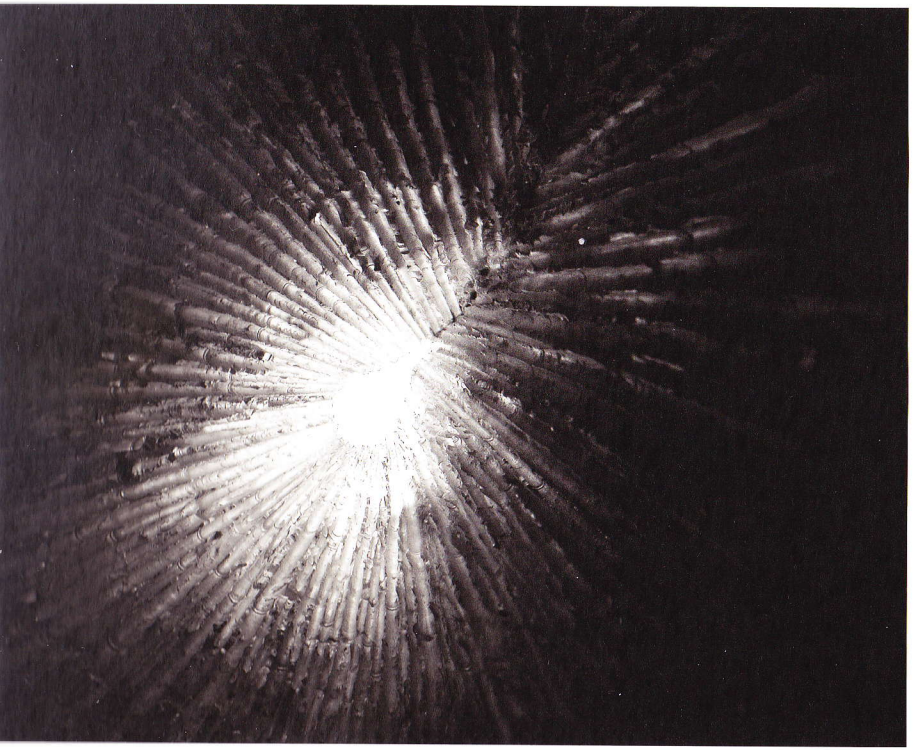
Haus Zumthor, 2005, silk curtains by Koho Mori

gold leaf. And this gold leaf – we all know this but it really touched me when I saw it – the gold leaf shone right from the back of the room, out of a deep darkness. Which means gold seams to have the capacity to pick up even the smallest quantities of light and reflect them in the darkness. That was an example of light. I have two favourite ideas about this and I always come back to them. Obviously we don't build something then phone up the electricians when we're finished and start asking ourselves: okay, so where are we going to put the lighting – how are we going to light this thing? No, we factor that in from the beginning. So the first of my favourite ideas is this: to plan the building as a pure mass of shadow then, afterwards, to put in light as if you were hollowing out the darkness, as if the light were a new mass seeping in. The other idea – all very logical by the way, nothing mysterious here: everybody does this. The second idea I like is this: to go about lighting materials and surfaces systematically and to look at the way they reflect the light. In other words, to choose the materials in the knowledge of the way they reflect and to fit everything together on the basis of that knowledge. How miserable it has made me feel in



Pavilion, Louise Bourgeois, study model, Dia Centre for the Arts, Beacon, NY, USA

the last couple of days to see how few houses in this incredibly beautiful and natural part of the country make use of the light. The houses appear so dull – I don't know why that is. Is it what they paint their houses with? Whatever it is, it kills the houses. But about every tenth house has some old bit where you suddenly notice something shining out, where life has begun to gleam again. But it's so lovely when you can choose and combine your materials, your fabric, clothes too, because they look good in the light. Thinking about daylight and artificial light I have to admit that daylight, the light on things, is so moving to me that I feel it almost as a spiritual quality. When the sun comes up in the morning – which I always find so marvellous, absolutely fantastic the way it comes back every morning – and casts its light on things, it doesn't feel as if it quite belongs in this world. I don't understand light. It gives me the feeling there's something beyond me, something beyond all understanding. And I am very glad, very grateful that there is such a thing. And I have that feeling here too; I'll have it later when we go outside. For an architect that light is a thousand times better than artificial light. Now, I've actually got to the end of what I wanted to say



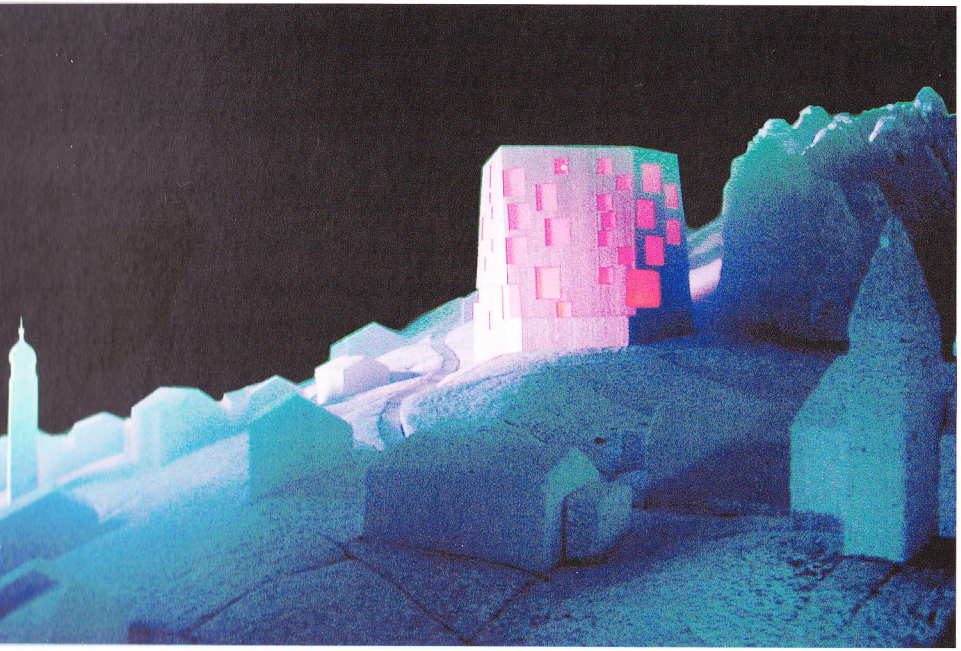
Bruder Klaus Chapel, under construction, Mechernich, opening to the sky, model

But again I wonder: is that really all? And again, there's something I have to admit: I need to add three short appendices. The nine chapters I've already given you could probably be described as ways of approaching my work, or the way my office approaches it. They may be idiosyncratic in parts, but they probably have an objective side to them too, whereas what I am about to tell you is more personal to me, and probably can't be generalised in the same way as many of things I have said hitherto. But if I am to speak of my own work then I have to say what really moves me. And so here are three more things.

The first, taking it to a different, transcendent level for me, an environment is **‹Architecture as Surroundings›**. That really appeals to me: the idea of creating a building, or big complex of buildings, or even a small one, and that it becomes part of its surroundings. Like something in Handke. (Peter Handke has variously described environment and the physical environing process, for instance in the interview book ‹Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen›.) What I am thinking of are my human surroundings – although they won't only be mine – and of the build-

Museum Kolumba, under construction, Cologne

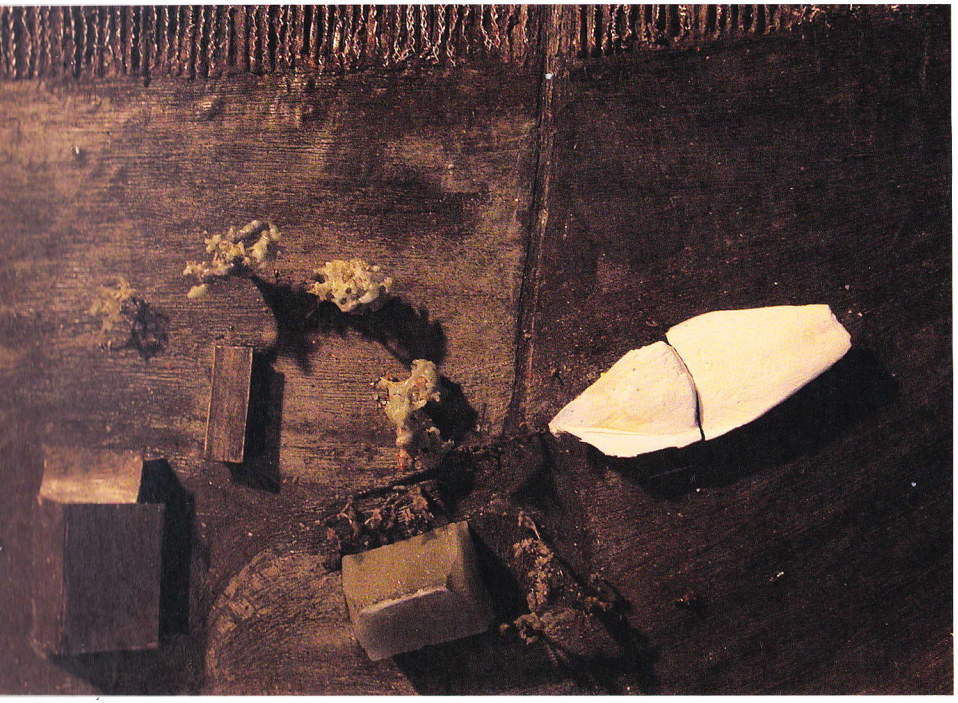
ing becoming part of people's lives, a place where children grow up. And perhaps one of the buildings will come back to them 25 years later, involuntarily, and they'll remember a corner, a street, a square – with no thought for its architect, but that isn't the point. Just the idea of these things still being there – there are plenty of buildings like that I remember, not done by me, but which have touched me, moved me, given me a sense of relief or helped me in some way. It increases the pleasure of my work when I imagine a certain building being remembered by someone in 25 years' time. Perhaps because that was where he kissed his first girlfriend or whatever. To put that in perspective: that quality is far more important to me than the idea that the building will still be mentioned in architectural reference works in 35 years. That's a different level altogether, and one that does not help me to design buildings. That is the first transcendent level in my work: the attempt to conceive of architecture as a human environment. Perhaps – and I suppose I'd better admit this – perhaps it has something to do with love. I love architecture; I love surrounding buildings, and I suppose I love it when other people love them too. I have to admit it: it would



Mountain Hotel, project 2000, Tschlin, Graubünden

make me very happy to have made things which other people love.

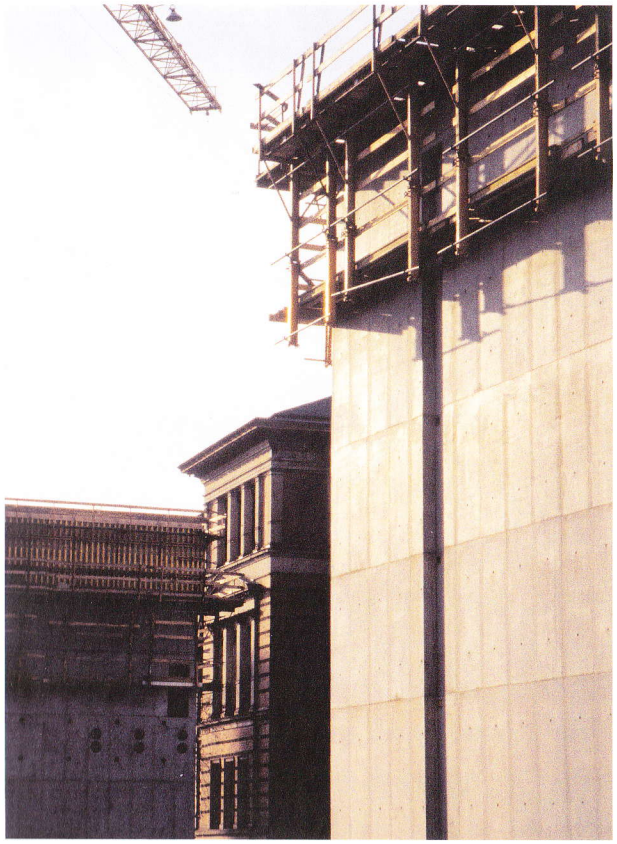
Appendix two. What's my heading here? **‹Coherence›.** That's more of a feeling too. I mean – there are all these ideas about the best way of doing things and making things in architecture, which also take place on a different level, a professional level I am not talking about here. That's just daily office life – something you can talk about in an university seminar or at the office. That's more of an academic problem. What I'm saying is that all these things that need deciding – all those thousands of occasions where an architect is put on the spot and has to make the right decision – I'd be quite happy if all that was resolved by use. In short, the highest compliment for me is not when someone comes along and grasps the form and says: Ah yes, I see, you were trying to achieve this really cool form, or something, but when the proof of the pudding is found in the eating, as it were. That is the highest compliment of all. And I'm not alone among architects in feeling that – in fact, it's an ancient tradition, in literature too, in writing, and in art. There's a good way of putting this that seems



appropriate to me: the idea of things coming into their own, of finding themselves, because they have become the thing that they actually set out to be. Architecture, after all, is made for our use. It is not a free art in that sense. I think architecture attains its highest quality as an applied art. And it is at its most beautiful when things have come into their own, when they are coherent. That is when everything refers to everything else and it is impossible to remove a single thing without destroying the whole. Place, use and form. The form reflects the place, the place is just so, and the use reflects this and that.

Summer Restaurant on Ufenau Island, Lake of Zurich, project, study model

But something else is missing – now this really is the last thing, although in some ways it is already there. I have managed, in nine short chapters and two appendices, not to go into the subject of form. That is entirely obvious – it's a passion of mine, one that helps a lot in my work. Form is not something we work on – we apply ourselves to all the other things. To sound, noises, materials, construction, anatomy etc. The body of architecture, in the primary stages, is construction, anatomy: putting things together in a logical fashion. These are the things we



apply ourselves to, while at the same time keeping our eye on place, and on use. That is all that is demanded of me – here is the place, on which I may or may not have some influence, and this is the use. We generally create a large model, or a drawing. Usually it's a model. And sometimes you can see at that stage that it feels right – things cohering. And then I might look at it and say: sure, it coheres, only it isn't beautiful. So at the end of the day I actually do take a look at things. What I find is that when things have come out well they tend to assume a form which often surprises me when I finally stand back from the work and which makes me think: you could never have imagined when you started out that this would be the outcome. And that is something that only happens sometimes, even after all these years – slow architecture. It really gives me pleasure, makes me proud too. But if, at the end of the day, the thing does not look beautiful – and I'm deliberately just saying beautiful here, there are books on aesthetics if you want – if the form doesn't move me, then I'll go back to the beginning and start again. So you could say my very final chapter heading, my final aim, probably is: **‹The Beautiful Form›**. I may find it that in

Documentation Centre, Topography of Terror, Berlin, stairwell West, under construction, cancelled in 2004

some icon, and sometimes in a still life – both help me to see how something has found its form – but also in a common or garden tool, in literature, in a piece of music. Thank you for listening.

Annunziata, Antonello da Messina, 1475–76, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia di Palazzo Abatellis, Palermo

A lecture delivered on 1 June 2003 at the ‹Kunstscheune›, Wendlinghausen Castle, ‹Wege durch das Land› Festival of Literature and Music in East-Westphalia-Lippe

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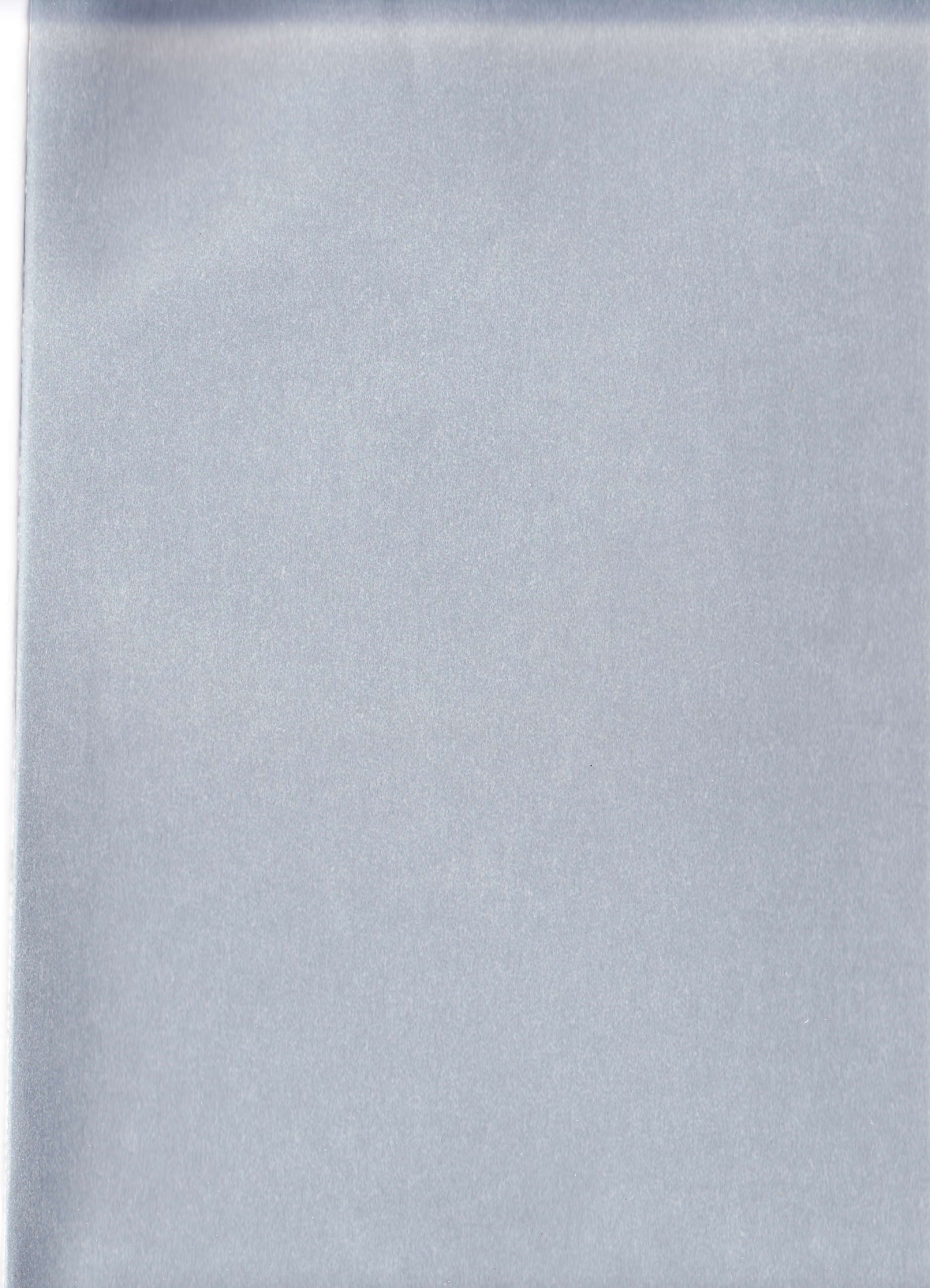
Peter Zumthor

Born in Basel in 1943, trained as a cabinetmaker, designer, and architect at the Kunstgewerbeschule Basel and Pratt Institute, New York. Since 1979 own practice in Haldenstein, Switzerland. Professor at the Accademia di architettura, Università della Svizzera italiana.

Major buildings: *Protective Housing for Roman Archaeological Excavations*, Chur, 1986; *Sogn Benedetg Chapel*, Sumvitg, 1988; *Homes for Senior Citizens*, Chur-Masans, 1993; *Thermal Baths Vals*, 1996; *Kunsthaus Bregenz*, 1997; *Swiss Pavilion Expo 2000*, Hannover; *Documentation Centre ‹Topography of Terror›*, Berlin, constructed parts of 1997 demolished 2004 by Berlin State; *Art Museum Kolumba*, Cologne, 2007; *Saint Bruder Klaus Field Chapel*, Scheidtweiler farm, Mechernich, Germany, 2007.